

Article

'When she calls for help' – Domestic violence in Christian families

Leonie Westenberg,

Associate Lecturer, Theology School of Philosophy and Theology University of Notre Dame, Australia, Sydney campus; Leonie.westenberg@nd.edu.au

Abstract: Violence in relationships is a common experience for a significant number of women. VicHealth (Australia) has noted that one of the underlying and contributing factors towards violence against women is their environment, citing 'faith-based institutions' such as churches as one such environment for many women. Indeed, international research shows that the language of religion is often used by women to explain abuse. Additionally, abused Christian women are more likely to remain in or return to unsafe relationships, citing religious beliefs to support avoidance of 'family break-ups' despite abuse. In contrast, however, churches can address domestic violence within a context of care, with emphasis on a theology of biblical equality. This paper examines how domestic violence may be supported by Christian language and belief, and suggests an 'alternate theology' concerning religious language in concepts of gender roles, sacrifice, submission and suffering. It reviews current research on the connection between Christian religious language and domestic violence against women, to highlight the Christian church's role as a contributing factor to such abuse. Finally, the paper makes some suggestions on how religious language can, in contrast to perpetuating abuse through norms, sever the connections between domestic violence and religious language

Keywords: domestic violence; religion; families; women; abuse; theology; language

1. Introduction

Violence in relationships is a common experience for a significant number of women. To use an Australian statistic as an example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) reports that one in three women have experienced physical violence in relationships, with 57% of female deaths due to homicide being perpetrated by an intimate partner. The United Nations defines violence against women as 'any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life' (WHO, 2016). This includes intimate partner violence (IPV) that describes the behaviour of an intimate partner or ex-partner which causes physical, sexual or psychological harm. Such intimate partner abuse and sexual violence is most often perpetrated by men against women, with a 2013 WHO analysis reflecting the fact that, world-wide, almost one third (30%) of women who have been in a relationship have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from their intimate partner.

As a woman and a theologian such statistics cause me to ponder the prevalence of domestic violence in Christian, religious families. Does religion have a role in perpetuating domestic violence, or in silencing sufferers of such violence, and what is the prevalence of domestic violence in religious,

specifically Christian, families? VicHealth (Australia, 2007) notes that one of the underlying and contributing factors towards violence against women is their environment, citing 'faith-based institutions' such as churches as one such environment for many women. Robert Wuthnow (2004) in his work on the sociology of religion writes of religion as representing social norms and cultural understandings that have become embedded in the religion itself, in its practice, language and structures of power. Such norms and power structures can contribute to individuals' perpetration of domestic violence and to the silencing of those who suffer; research by theologian Rod Buxton (2000) demonstrates the contrast that exists in some Christian churches between offering hope for those in need while registering domestic violence as a taboo subject for discussion. Finally, the patriarchal language of Christian religions can be criticised as being conducive to the submission of women and thus acting as a contributing factor to domestic violence in some Christian families (McMullin, Nason-Clark, Fisher-Townsend & Holtman, 2012).

This paper acknowledges the research on domestic violence in religious, non-Christian families (see 'A Commentary on Religion and Domestic Violence' by Fortune, Abugidieri and Dratch, 2010). However, this paper has a focus specifically on domestic violence against women in Christian families, and aims to a) provide a brief picture of domestic violence in Christian families in the Western world, b) examine Christian religious language that perpetuates domestic violence and c) make some suggestions on how religious language can be changed to help sever the connection between Christian religious language and abuse.

2. A Picture of Domestic Violence in Christian Families in the Western World

Carol Winkelmann portrays the experience of abused women in her book 'The Language of Battered Women: A rhetorical analysis of personal theologies' (2004). Winkelmann spent nine years with women in refuges or shelters, discussing experiences, faith, and their personal understanding of theology stemming from their participation in Christian churches. Her research highlights the fact that the language of religion is often used by women to explain abuse. The women in Winkelmann's research used religious imagery to discuss suffering and evil; while such language often assists the women in recovery of abuse, many of the women themselves noted that organised religion in the guise of local churches also offered strong support for a convention of patriarchal marriage and the attendant abuse that was suffered by the women in such marriages. Indeed, several women talked of their previous acceptance of abuse with use of religious language that implied submission and, as one writer described, the notion that such suffering and violence was 'their lot' in life (McMullin, Nason-Clark, Fisher-Townsend & Holtman, 2012).

Additionally, abused Christian women are more likely to remain in or return to unsafe relationships, citing religious beliefs to support such decisions (Griffin & Maples, 1997). These researchers detail the role that a woman's value system holds in decisions concerning response to domestic violence, mentioning women's religious beliefs related to submission to God and husband, their beliefs on the value of pain and suffering, and views on what is seen as the 'problem' of divorce as examples where women use religious language to support remaining in abusive relationships. This does, in fact, connect with Carol Gilligan's (1982) research concerning women's value of caring for relationships; when it appears to be 'selfish' to consider their own needs, women in Gilligan's study

chose the option of 'victim' to protect children and maintain family relationships¹. To Christian women who value the sanctity of marriage (a commonly held belief in both Protestant and Catholic families), to assert oneself against domestic violence can, as Gilligan has noted, become 'potentially immoral' because of 'its power to hurt others' for whom the Christian woman feels responsibility and care, including the abusive spouse (Gilligan, 1982).

Christian women, then, who suffer domestic violence display a tendency to use Christian imagery and religious language to explain and tolerate abuse, and to remain in or return to marriages that contain domestic violence. What, though, is the prevalence of intimate partner domestic violence in Christian families? Katrina Kelmendi (2013) argues that research on domestic violence was not undertaken until the 1960s because of 'cultural norms that refused to consider it a problem with consequences'. Furthermore, research on intimate partner domestic violence in the general population has been critiqued as providing a less than accurate picture of the experience of abuse due to operational definitions of violence, risk factors associated with methodology, and similar concerns (Knickmeyer, Levitt & Horne, 2016). This failure to provide an accurate picture of IPV is relevant particularly with regard to research on Christian families; for example, Knickmeyer, Levitt and Horne (2016) describe the failure of studies on religious affiliation and domestic violence in Canada and the US to identify the role of patriarchy in IPV, focusing instead solely on denominational relationships, if any. However, qualitative research (see, for example, research by Knickmeyer (2016) with women from different Christian denominations; data collected by Levitt (2016) in the Memphis, Tennessee area of the US; and Nason-Clark (1997) in Atlantic, Canada) supports the findings of a 2006 study by the Anglican church in Britain that 'incidence of domestic abuse within church ...congregations is similar to the rate within the general population.' In other words, the prevalence of domestic violence in Western Christian families appears likely to be similar to the prevalence of such violence in the general population. What differs, however, is what has been called the added 'vulnerability' of Christian women, who speak of both abuse and marriage in spiritual overtones (McMullin, Nason-Clark, Fisher-Townsend & Holtman, 2012). Such women use religious language to describe why they remain in or return to relationships that involve domestic violence, citing the undesirability of divorce, the need to love and honour husbands ('unto death') and the power of forgiveness and prayer to generate change in the abuser. It is the religious language that perpetuates and/or tolerates domestic violence (Nason-Clark, 2009).

3. How Christian Language Perpetuates Violence

A cross-denominational study of Christian women who had experienced domestic violence in their marriage found that the women felt compelled to present a facade of the perfect Christian woman and family in local church communities (Knickmeyer, Levitt & Horne, 2016). The need for the facade was often facilitated by the language of Christianity, with overtones of the perfect wife (Proverbs 31) and discussion in women's groups on submitting to their husbands, with women tending to 'close ranks' around the abuser to protect the institution of marriage.

In discussing the Christian religious language that perpetuates domestic violence, one can categorise use of language in several key areas. The first concerns women's submission and male leadership; the second centres on the sanctity of marriage; and the third connects the value of suffering to the virtue of forgiveness. Women in various studies cite language and concepts in each of these categories that were used particularly by their husbands and local pastors to support staying in the marriage in spite of domestic violence.

Women's submission and male leadership

While studies have demonstrated that Christian men are no more likely to be abusers than men in the general population (Ellison & Bartkowski, 1991) and that religious affiliation according to denomination and/or liberal/conservative Christian views does not predict the likelihood of domestic violence (Wang, Levitt, Horne & Klesges, 2009) there remains the fact that Christian women who have suffered domestic violence cite the use of religious language to accept abuse (Knickmeyer, Levitt & Horne, 2016). For example, one participant in the cross-denominational study described use of religious language to condone abuse:

'And that's something my husband always put in front of me when we were fighting. 'Uh, you Catholic, and you suppose to be at home, and you suppose to have sex, the Bible says you supposed to, uh, do whatever your husband wants in sex.'I was supposed to have as many children as he wanted to' (P-09, Knickmeyer, Levitt & Horne, 2016).

The use of the Bible or church teaching to substantiate abuse is significant for, as Michel Foucault (1972) noted, language as discourse structures our knowledge and vision of the world. Religious language, indeed, can structure a vision that either upholds or abhors domestic violence, with Miles (2016) arguing that the language of biblical equality in marriage can be employed to assist those suffering domestic violence; however, in contrast, the assignation of power in Christian religious language, using terms such as headship and male leadership, often leads to men abusing the power that is seemingly bestowed on them in marriage. Investigation of IPV highlights the fact that such violence occurs most frequently in families where there exists a male dominated imbalance of power (Levitt & Ware, 2006); even Christian churches that discuss a servanthood role of male leadership in marriage nevertheless reinforce a male dominated imbalance of power with the result that a 'benevolent sexism' is promoted (Levitt, Swanger & Butler, 2016). Indeed, a study of Christian male perpetrators of domestic violence suggests that the men themselves see masculinity and power as being interrelated (Barnard, Levitt & Klesges, 2016). Similarly, 24% of Christian women who have suffered domestic violence name the use of the language of submission and male leadership in marriage as being cited by their spouse in support of abuse (Knickmeyer, Levitt, Horne & Bayer, 2004). Finally, these women also state that concepts of wifely submission to husbands as the head of the home contributed to their choices to remain in or return to marriages that exhibited domestic violence (Knickmeyer, Levitt, Horne & Bayer, 2004).

The sanctity of marriage

In one survey of faith leaders, a predominant theme concerning IPV was the balancing of safety with the sanctity of marriage (Ware, Levitt & Bayer, 2003). Many pastors for example, cited the statement 'God hates divorce' in order to support the intervention and counselling that should occur within

families that experience domestic violence rather than advocating separation or divorce (Ware, Levitt & Bayer, 2003). Women in the cross-denominational study cited similar language, mentioning the sacredness of the 'contract of marriage' before God as one reason why they initially chose to remain in abusive marriages (Knickmeyer, Levitt & Horne, 2016). Such religious language and concepts concerning marriage as a sacrament or a sacred bond has caused a tension for women and for the faith leaders to whom they turn to help; if marriage is seen as indissoluble, should the response to domestic violence avoid separation and divorce, for example? For many women, the choice to remain in abusive marriages was tied to religious belief concerning the sanctity of marriage as an institution to be preserved, and, as Levitt and Ware (2006) have described, faith leaders themselves struggle to be aware of appropriate responses to domestic violence within the context of language that describes marriage as a sacred, unbreakable bond.

The value of suffering and the virtue of forgiveness

Christian religious language often presents the concept of mercy with the association of forgiveness as a virtue. For many Christian women who have suffered IPV, the language of forgiveness is described as being pivotal to their response to domestic violence, especially to initial incidences of such violence (Wang, Levitt, Horne & Klesges, 2009). For example, one woman who suffered domestic violence described the power of the language of forgiveness as such:

'Uh, I forgive him, because that's my religion. We forgive the husbands. We take it, you know, and you give chances to people....If God forgave us, we forgive them. That's how it is. We're taught that' (P-09, Knickmeyer, Levitt & Horne, 2016).

Describing the forgiveness of God in the language of forgiving others regardless of their actions restructures experience; for Christian women in several studies the need to forgive shaped their acceptance of domestic violence or, at least, the requirement to give abusive spouses a second (or third, or more) chance. One study of evangelical Christian women in Canada and the U.S. found that though women's spiritual beliefs could enrich their recovery from abuse, for most of the women involved in the study, the 'spiritualisation' of the problem by those who hold positions of authority in the church, with use of language that attributes power and transformation to forgiveness, meant that the abusive spouse was excused, with the women themselves feeling blame for any lack of forgiveness (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000). As one participant in the study described it:

'I felt like the Lord was saying to me 'don't feel sorry for yourself, you have to forgive this guy' ...I went and apologised to him [my husband] for [him] being abusive to me' (Giesbrecht and Irene Sevcik, 2000).

The language of 'redemptive suffering' tied to Christian talk of forgiveness tends to encourage Christian women to return to or remain in abusive marriages (Brock & Parker, 2001).

4. How Religious Language can be Changed, to Sever the Connection between Christian Language and Abuse

Levitt, Swanger and Butler (2016) describe how religious communities can help those who suffer or have suffered domestic violence while also working to prevent such violence. They suggest a multi-faceted approach including practical assistance. This paper, in turn, has focussed on religious

language in particular; on how religious language perpetuates domestic violence and can encourage women to remain in or return to abusive marriages. Thus, my suggestions, though exploratory, centre on changing the use of Christian language to foster biblical equality; equality in Christ being an important concept in both Catholic and Protestant churches, with examples in Scripture, for example, Galatians 3:28 (Bodd, 2016).

The Anglican Church UK Archbishops' Council's (2006) document on domestic violence has called language that perpetuates domestic abuse a 'harmful theology' that emphasises power and power structures. The document instead describes God in language of respect for others alongside compassion for all, with a subversion of power, citing Christ's ministry as an example of such subversion of power and authority. Furthermore, the document denotes freedom as being central to the Christian doctrine; language of freedom can thus be liberating when combined with the language of respect and dignity. The Christian church can speak of the respect due to each person made in the image of God, mirroring the respect and care shown for others by Christ, and the corresponding dignity with which each person should be treated. Freedom then, of necessity, requires freedom from abuse.

Christian language concerning the virtue of forgiveness and suffering can also reflect discussion of the virtue of justice. Forgiveness does not require acceptance of the injustice of domestic violence but demands that justice be served for those who suffer. Similarly, religious language concerning marriage and divorce can focus not only on the institution of marriage itself but on the individuals within the marriage; in this way the institution of marriage will not be seen to be more sacred or more worthy of respect than the individuals themselves, who should be treated with dignity and to whom justice is due (in particular, considering the justice due to the those who have suffered domestic violence).

Language shapes our understanding and experience. Changing Christian religious language to discuss respect, dignity, compassion, freedom, and justice (important tenets in the Christian faith) can provide a way of correcting 'harmful theology' while encouraging discourse on these pivotal Christian beliefs that could then be lived in practice in faith communities, to help those who have suffered domestic violence and to sever the connection between Christian language, practice and abuse. Practical measures, including training of faith leaders in understanding IPV, are of course of paramount importance. Yet the changing of Christian language to reflect Christianity's commitment to justice, dignity and compassion will also help prevent the cycle of domestic violence, for the change denotes theological correction, and I quote here the Anglican Church in Britain's guidelines on domestic abuse:

'Theological correction requires critical awareness both of ideas which are being expressed and the context in which they are expressed. It must extend not only to sermons and formal teaching, but also to the use of hymns, symbols and metaphors, and the everyday actions which are informed by belief in God. It [theological correction] also calls for imagination and sensitivity in using potentially problematic language and doctrines...' (Anglican Church UK Archbishops' Council, 2006).

Therefore, theological correction of Christian religious language can be one important factor in preventing the perpetration of domestic violence.

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